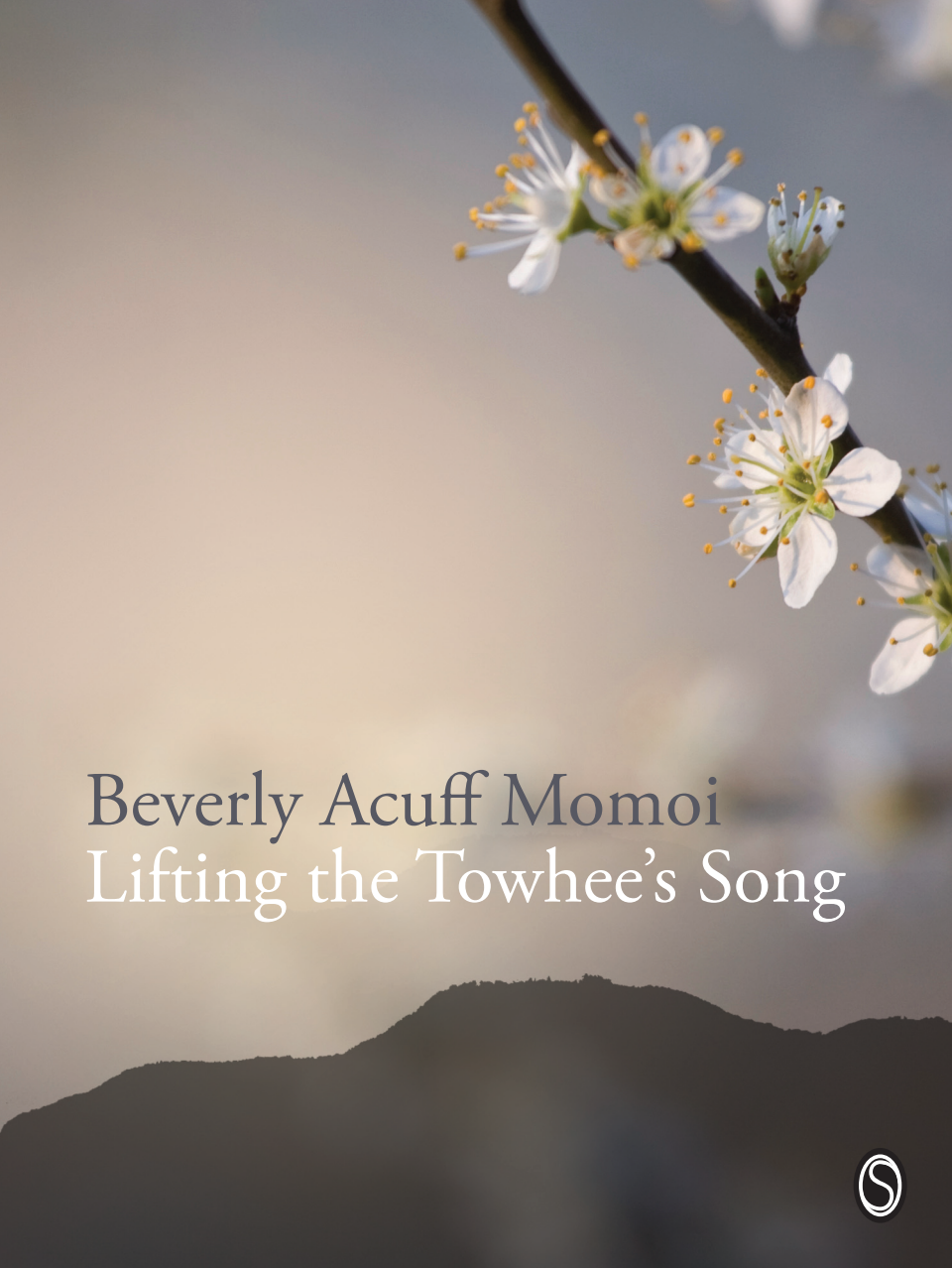
Beverly Acuff Momoi
Lifting the Towhee's Song

First published in Great Britain in 2012 by
Snapshot Press, Orchard House, High Lane, Ormskirk L40 7SL

at www.snapshotpress.co.uk/ebooks.htm

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Typeset in Adobe Garamond Pro

Cover artwork © John Barlow
incorporating photograph of plum blossoms © Andrejs Zemdega

Design by John Barlow

Acknowledgements

Some of the stories included in this manuscript were first reported on NHK, Reuters and other news media.

"March 26, 2011" was first published in *Wild Violets: Yuki Teikei Haiku Society Members' Anthology 2011* (Yuki Teikei Haiku Society, 2011).

Lifting the Towhee's Song

March 26, 2011

Mornings I sit. Buddhism teaches non-attachment, but I am terrified. I close my eyes, and with each breath, waves slam against the harbor. In . . . and out. Homes, now kindling. Family cars in Tonka toy pile-ups. In. And out. And with this breath. People scrambling, leaving all but life itself. Again. In. Out. How do I let them go? A woman sitting, palms joined. No words. Just the ocean. And this moment. In. Out.

Earth Hour—
it's lights out, just the stars
what's left of the moon

Snow Country

The interpreter's voice is tight. Her words stumble, start over sharp intakes of breath. The water in reactor number 2 is extremely high—ten million times higher—in radioactive substances. The source of the leakage has not been determined. About the workers who stood in irradiated water in reactor number 3, the degree of injury may not be known for several weeks. The government has criticized the utility for improper management.

Since the earthquake, 10,418 people are dead. The number of victims is expected to grow. The meteorological agency has issued warnings for a severe drop in temperature. High winds, rough seas are also likely. People are advised to take care.

not a cherry blossom in sight
spring arrives late
in snow country

What Remains

The woman looks like my mother-in-law—shy smile, slightly stooped, tiredness living in the wrinkles around her eyes. Blue rubber gloves protect her hands, arms up to the elbows. She sits on her haunches, rummaging through the broken refrigerator, sorting carefully. Perishables are set to the side. Mud-spattered carrots, box of chocolates from Hokkaido, kombu soup base, half a bottle of green tea. These go into her string bag. Satisfied nothing else can be salvaged, she bows, heads back to make something of what remains.

the silver fir's
snow heavy branches fade into sky
March equinox

Waiting for Gas

I sit in a queue two-cars deep, waiting for gas. The woman ahead has a problem. She shades her eyes to read the instructions, rummages for and then drops her credit card, wrestles the nozzle into the tank of her car. Clearly, self-serve gas is a new concept for her. We watch, irritated. No one gets out to help.

In Tokyo, our nephew has a full tank of gas. Five days after the great northern Japan earthquake, five days into the nuclear plant crisis, most of the roads going north are closed. He loads bedding, clothes, food, water, and heads for home. When his tank drops to two-thirds, he queues up at the next open station. Sometimes he waits eight hours for a quarter-tank of gas but he does not dare let it drop to empty. He does not know where, or if, another station will be open. He arrives in Tohoku three days later, one day after his uncle's cremation.

full moon maple
struggling to bloom
March flurries

Savage Spring

In California, the poppies are brilliant this year. I have been so lost in grief, then suddenly this wild swath of life. I see them as if for the first time, golden faces turned to the heavens.

savage spring
a single mud-stained photograph
of her three-year-old

Shudders

My mother shudders at the first whisper of wind. She grew up in Arkansas where tornadoes marked the arrival of spring. One of her earliest memories is racing for shelter, hail as big as golf balls and the winds shrieking overhead. Huddled in the root cellar, she became hysterical, throwing herself against her mother and crying, "I can't stand this! I can't! I can't!" She recalls my grandmother looking straight into her eyes and saying, "Yes, you can. You can stand it. You will."

in Fukushima
such bitter cold then
the first plum blossom

Shigata Ga Nai

Shigata ga nai. It can't be helped. Early in my marriage, when I railed against some perceived injustice—the men not helping out in the kitchen or a neighbor more interested in appearances than friendship or my husband being slighted by a childhood friend—my mother-in-law would hear me out, before giving a sad smile and saying, *Shigata ga nai*.

She spoke no English, and her words were a confusing mix of Fukushima-ben and standard Japanese, but she was one of my best teachers. Patient and unfazed by my lack of comprehension, she would just repeat, as many times as necessary, knowing that one day I would tie circumstance to expression.

Nine years after her death, the Great East Japan Earthquake broke apart families throughout Tohoku and took the life of her first son. On the day of his cremation, seven days after the quake, neither his son in Tokyo nor his brother in the United States could make their way back home. *Shigata ga nai*. *Shigata ga nai*.

in the deep north
snow melts on Shinobuyama
mountain that endures

Asleep

Every night now I fall asleep with the television on. Sometimes it seems my husband does not sleep at all.

When the Great East Japan Earthquake struck three weeks ago, we missed it. We slept through the first six hours as quake and tsunami devastated Tohoku. Then the phone rang. It was my sister calling from Florida, her voice breaking up as she asked if everyone was okay. We didn't know what she was talking about.

shadow of spring—
how hungry the waves are
reclaiming the land

Spring Tides

It is 23 days since the 9.0 earthquake and subsequent tsunami struck Japan's northeast coast. More than 15,000 people cannot be located. U.S. forces have joined Japanese military and maritime services in a 'search surge,' a three-day push to find people. Why now? I rage. Why three weeks later? My husband quietly explains that this is the weekend when spring tides pull back to their lowest, widest ebb. They hope the sea will return some of the missing.

another spring
another leaving—ever constant
sound of sutras

Ama Cha

An old woman sits in a chair, her feet soaking in a blue plastic tub. An aid worker kneels in front of her, one heel in his hands, massaging first her arch then her toes, before gently slipping it back into the water. Four weeks after the quake, and there is no running water in the shelter.

The man shakes his head. He was in Kobe in '95. Helped in the recovery after the Great Sichuan Earthquake in 2008. "I've never seen anything like this."

spring light—
bathing the Buddha
in *Ama Cha*

Note
Ama Cha is tea made from dried hydrangea leaves; the literal meaning is "sweet tea." It is used in temple ceremonies observing the Buddha's birthday in Japan.

Later Than You Think

Baseball season has just begun, and my husband is getting ready for his return to Japan, his second trip in as many months. He won't be here to see the Cubs—our team since grad school days in Chicago. They will be playing the west coast about the time he leaves for Fukushima. We laugh remembering Harry Caray's exuberant seventh inning stretch. The certainty of his warning to players perennially behind on the count: "It's later than you think."

He checks the pitch black of his funeral suit for any soiled areas that might need cleaning. "I'm glad I went back in February. I would have regretted that the rest of my life."

when everything
we remembered was good
cherry blossom sky

A Yellow Flag

I am slowly working my way through our boxes of stuff. My husband and I save everything. We have menus of *kaiseki* dinners marking anniversaries; lesson plans from decades ago when one or the other of us was teaching; baby pictures of nieces and nephews who now have babies of their own; tapes of my mother telling stories for a family history project; letters from my grandmother who died in '85; a great picture of my father-in-law laughing.

As I sort, NHK provides a running commentary on the cleanup efforts along the northeast coast of Japan. 24.9 million tons of debris. Mementos of people's lives. In Minamisoma, a man goes through the rubble of his home, methodically searching for his father's memorial plaque from the family altar. He finds his daughter's wedding pictures—beautifully serious in her kimono, more relaxed in her white wedding dress—and carefully wipes off the mud. His father's name plaque still missing, he plants a yellow flag at the door of his home to signal workers: Do not destroy. He has not given up looking.

against a gray sky
the brilliance of yellow
daffodils

All Ashes

Does grieving ever end? For weeks, people in northeast Japan wander among the wreckage of their lives, looking for family and friends, praying to find their bodies. And when they find them—for those who find them—will there be fuel for cremation? Fire purifies. It frees the soul to begin its journey to the next life. But in some towns, officials have begun mass burials, saying the fuel is needed for the living.

Buddhist priest Bunkei Abe does not agree. He vows to use the last drop of kerosene to honor the dead. For those who remain.

against this
wide and sorrowful sky we are
all ashes and smoke

How the Bamboo Bends

April 11, 2011. 02:46 p.m. Throughout Japan, sirens. Then silence. How to endure this endless grief.

this precarious spring
see how the bamboo bends
bows

Animals

As I listen to the vets talk about the hundreds of thousands of animals—cows, pigs, chickens, dogs and cats—starving in the evacuation zone, I check the purple and orange 'Pet Rescue Alert' sticker in our front window. All the numbers still legible.

Passover—
a solitary cat sits
in the doorway

Golden Week

It's the start of Golden Week in Japan, and all the trains are crowded. My husband waits in line for over an hour to get a ticket on the Shinkansen. Everyone is going home.

last day of April
returning to Fukushima
for the funeral

Passing Desperate

It gets harder to survive. More and more friends and family worry about finding or keeping a job—any job. They have been burned out from working 60-hour workweeks or squeezed out entirely. They have kids, mortgages, elderly parents. Some passed desperate ages ago.

So when I read about the Fukushima Daiichi workers, I wonder. Such harrowing work.

Three workers have died in two months. The first two were killed in the tsunami. The third died a few days ago. A contractor. It was his second day on the job. He was wearing radiation gear—suit, mask, gloves—but conditions in the plant are brutal, and with protective clothing it must be like working in a sauna. Doctors concluded his death was unrelated to the plant's radiation levels. He was in his 60s, carrying heavy equipment, most likely felled by a heart attack.

the green rescue
of spring—miner's lettuce
everywhere

Lifting the Towhee's Song

I have been thinking about Darwin and the puzzle of survival.

reaching into sky
the farmer culls pear blossoms
for October fruit

In Japan, a son mourns. When the earthquake struck, his father was in Futaba Hospital for treatment; 90 patients were left unattended. The death certificate simply states that his father died of lung cancer. No mention is made of the disaster, the chaos, the abandonment.

Forty miles inland but well within the zone of destruction, another man died that weekend, and our family still grieves. A handsome man with an easy smile, my brother-in-law was stricken with leukemia a year ago. We were shocked, but thankful when he responded to treatment. Then the temblor. He was the toughest one among us.

California spring
the purple finch lifting
the towhee's song

Earthquake Light

The day of the funeral, another aftershock.

Is that my sister-in-law? Looking at the photos, I hardly recognize the woman who first served me pickled plums for breakfast. Together we climbed Shinobuyama, and she showed me the tree where she picked those plums, as had her mother and her grandmother before her.

earthquake light
how does the tree survive
this spring

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